

REVIEW: *JEOPARDY AND A TIBETAN
HERDSWOMAN'S LIFE: 16 HOURS IN A
DAY* BY GU RU 'PHRIN LAS གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས་

Reviewed by Chos skyong skyabs ཚོས་སྒྲོང་སྒྲུབ་ལ། (Qiejiangjia 切江加)*



Gu ru 'phrin las (director, cinematographer, editor). 2020. *Pha sa* [*Jeopardy*]. Documentary Film. 106 mins. A mdo Tibetan dialect with English subtitles (<https://bit.ly/3xybajJ> 2 January 2022).



Gu ru 'phrin las (director, cinematographer, editor). 2020. *A Tibetan Herdsman's Life: 16 Hours in a Day*. 21 mins. A mdo Tibetan dialect with English subtitles, (<https://bit.ly/39JJUff> 2 January 2022).

INTRODUCTION

I first introduce Gu ru 'phrin las' (hereafter: Gu ru) film and literary oeuvre before commenting on his documentary *Pha sa* '*Jeopardy*' and an abbreviated version of the same film - *A Tibetan Herdsman's Life: 16 Hours in a Day*.

My life experiences growing up in an A mdo Tibetan area with a family that continues to herd yaks and sheep on high-altitude pastures help me understand and interpret Gu ru's works. We lived year-round in a black yak-hair tent until about 1997. Before attending middle school, I herded our livestock and annually collected caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) on our

* Chos skyong skyabs (Qiejiangjia). 2023. Review: *Jeopardy* and a *Tibetan Herdsman's Life: 16 Hours in a Day* Gu ru 'phrin las. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 63:413-425.

summer pasture. Images of locals hunkered over and kneeling, slowly moving about on gray mountains searching for caterpillar fungus on rainy-snowy, chilly days are enduring memories. In the last two decades, my home area is also experiencing deteriorating grassland due to overgrazing and a growing number of pikas.

Gu ru was born and raised in a herding area more than 4,000 meters above sea level, in Smin thang (Mentang) Township, Gcig sgril (Jiuzhi) County, Mgo log (Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. His family had neither a radio nor a television when he was a child. His grandmother's narratives proved influential in this environment, immersing him in a vivid, imaginary world. He started school at the age of eight. From 2013-2017, he studied Tibetan literature at Northwest Minzu University in Lan gru (Lanzhou) and invested much effort in learning English.¹

Gu ru's Youtube channel (<https://bit.ly/3CxJEFm> 2 January 2022) features some of his documentary work:

(1) *Painful Transformation* (20.29 mins, <https://bit.ly/3ufqSQo>, 2016; 2 January 2022), shot with an iPhone 6, is based on a local woman's experiences coming to terms with her youngest son's murder during a gambling session and a second son's suicide. Defeating internal chaos, she eventually creates a peaceful life for herself.²

(2) *Inspiration* (15 mins, <https://bit.ly/3oe3MIR>, 2019; 2 January 2022) was also made in Smin thang Township. In 2016, Grub pa was a nine-year-old boy living with his grandparents in a herding area. His illiterate grandfather had herded livestock all his life. Recognizing the difficulties this foreshadowed, he tried various ways to interest the boy in study, but his grandson insisted he was more interested in herding.

¹ Gu ru 'phrin las. 2019. *Remembering Tomorrow* <https://bit.ly/2QAU4hX> 8 July 2021.

² Gu ru 'phrin las. 2017. Interview: Filmmaker. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 44:388-393 <https://bit.ly/3JsH5cf> 29 December 2021.

(3) Short pieces on local life include three folksongs, four games, five stories, two riddles, salting yaks, saddling a horse, packing a yak, and Ge sar festivities.¹

In 2021, Gu ru published *Remembering Tomorrow*, nineteen narratives based on local elders' experiences and memories.² During an interview, Gu ru commented:

The accessibility of government schooling has translated into less familiarity with local traditions. Knowledge of local songs, proverbs, riddles, games, oral stories, and understandings of life experiences and skills are no longer transmitted. Communicated from generation to generation, these aspects of our culture make us unique, and it is important to preserve them. With the widespread popularity of television and cell phones, many children have limited interest in traditional knowledge. We must find ways to share and pass this knowledge to children.³

With a long winter and a short cold summer (annual precipitation of 764 millimeters⁴), locals focus on herding yaks - an essential source of food and family income - and a few horses and

¹ Three folksongs (A, 1.21 mins, <https://bit.ly/3zM6Pu6> 31 December 2021; B, 1.41 mins, <https://bit.ly/3mb8IMa> 31 December 2021; C, 1.16 mins, <https://bit.ly/3CTw8MI> 31 December 2021; three games (A, 7 mins, <https://bit.ly/3EYRBFJ> 31 December 2021; B, 9.52 mins, <https://bit.ly/3mb96u6> 31 December 2021; C, 6.47 mins, <https://bit.ly/3zNQCuu> 31 December 2021; D, 3.47 mins, <https://bit.ly/3oe3MIR> 31 December 2021; five stories (A, 1.37 mins, <https://bit.ly/3kNizbn> 31 December 2021; B, 14.53 mins, <https://bit.ly/2XWCqf5> 31 December 2021; C, 5.17 mins, <https://bit.ly/3zKsOkP> 31 December 2021; D, 10.10 mins, <https://bit.ly/2XTJ45U> 31 December 2021; E, 4.34 mins), <https://bit.ly/3osDwL9> 31 December 2021; two riddles (A, 0.39 mins, <https://bit.ly/3kMzDOB> 31 December 2021; B, 9.2 mins), <https://bit.ly/3ifvCAB> 31 December 2021; salting yaks (6.26 mins), <https://bit.ly/3AQNN6Z> 31 December 2021; saddling a horse (2.18 mins), <https://bit.ly/3CRwCTL> 31 December 2021; packing a yak (6.18 mins, <https://bit.ly/3o8LFEE> 31 December 2021; and Ge sar festivities (6.1 mins, <https://bit.ly/3zIgXDT> 31 December 2021).

² Gu ru 'phrin las. 2019. *Remembering Tomorrow* <https://amzn.to/3kNuV3c> 8 July 2021.

³ An edited version of my WeChat interview with Gu ru 'phrin las (19 May 2021).

⁴ Geig sgril County official website <https://bit.ly/3zdSnfs> 8 July 2021.

sheep. In the last three decades, caterpillar fungus has become an important income source (Zhang 2003), with many locals collecting it annually for about two months. Historically, sheep were grazed, but there are few today due to a lack of people-power (small family size and children attending school and thus no longer available to herd) and rampant predation from wolves.

Jeopardy, the primary focus of this review, has three parts: *Prologue*, *Sowing Grass Seed*, and *A Tibetan Herdswoman's Daily Life*, shot with an iPhone XS Max in May 2020 in Smin thang Township.

"Prologue" features several locals collecting caterpillar fungus on a mountain. The camera pans the general area before focusing on a young man who comments that caterpillar fungus have decreased in the past few years. The following shots are of pika-damaged grassland and distressing scenes of dead yaks and two men helping a weak yak stand.

In *Sowing Grass Seed*, a minibus refuels and crosses a bridge over the Yellow River before entering a herding community where local adults have arrived by car and motorcycle. Some local adults prepare lunch after scattering and mixing grass seeds with soil on the grassland using rakes and yak horns. Four men go to a nearby home with a large plastic container to fetch hot water added to each person's lunch – instant noodles in disposable plastic bowls. They also choose from beverages, including Pepsi, Sprite, Jianlibao,¹ and Master Kong Iced Lemon Black Tea.²

After this group meal, noodle bowls, bottles, and boxes are collected near the lunch site. A local man arrives on a motorcycle with an empty plastic beverage bottle, siphons gasoline from his motorcycle tank, sprinkles it on the garbage, and ignites it.

¹ Jianlibao "a treasure to strengthen health" was the first soda pop created in PR China. Debuting as the Chinese team's official drink at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, sponsorships from sports teams and marketing as an energy drink made Jianlibao a popular Chinese soft drink in the 1990s <https://bit.ly/3nYWOFY> 5 November 2021.

² This drink has a sweet and slightly sour, lemony taste <https://bit.ly/3lmb635> 23 November 2021.

A local elder explains that pikas damage the grassland by digging holes, turning it into bare earth. He adds that to counter this degradation, locals collected seeds from indigenous grass, tossed the seeds on the ground, sprinkled crumbled yak dung as fertilizer over the seeds, and covered the seeds as mentioned above.

Another elder recalls this place was once a beautiful, rich grassland without bare earth. The locals are now trying to counter this damage by pikas by planting grass seeds. The elders are confident the earth will regenerate if the pikas do not eat the seeds.

The first elder says to the camera:

Sgo med¹ was a beautiful grassland, and everyone wanted to live here, where it was easy to herd livestock. This was the tribal leader's land. Nowadays, pikas damage the grassland by digging burrows.

Locals explain deteriorating grassland as the result of overgrazing. The livestock repeatedly tread with their hard hooves on the same limited land area, leading to bare earth and erosion, further exacerbated by the arrival of pikas in large numbers. Additionally, when locals collect caterpillar fungus in late spring and early summer, pikas further damage the grassland if they do not put the soil back after digging.

The condensed version of *Pha sa - A Tibetan Herdswoman's Daily Life* begins on a snowy, foggy day with a herdswoman milking in her family's yak enclosure. In the next shot, before the herdswoman and her family leave for the mountains, one of her daughters and a son arrive from their winter pasture by minibus. Planning on spending most of the day in the mountains, the herdswoman and her daughter carry two school bags of bread, biscuits, and cups. While the son and daughter climb up the mountain, the herdswoman and her husband each ride a horse to drive the family's yaks up the mountain to graze before joining their son and daughter to collect caterpillar fungus.

¹ The name of a tribe, the name of a place, and the setting of this documentary.

Around ten AM, the herdsman and her family reach mid-mountain and search for caterpillar fungus, squatting on the shady slope. The variable weather is highlighted: lunch begins as it snows, but the sun shines by the meal's end.

In the late afternoon, the herdsman and her family drive the yaks near a colored steel laminboard structure in the summer pasture, where they pitched a blue canvas tent nearby. The herdsman is soon occupied caring for a newborn yak calf that its mother refuses to nurse because she is weak from lack of forage.

When darkness comes, the herdsman makes a yak-dung fire in a metal stove, boils tea, and returns to the yak enclosure to feed the new, weak mothers. She tethers ten female yaks in a line and offers them *bya rtug* 'feed pellets'.

Later in the evening, all the family members gather in a tent of about twenty square meters. A metal stove used for cooking also provides heat. Food and containers are on one side of the tent. A large adobe sleeping-eating platform is on the other side, where the herdsman's husband rests from collecting caterpillar fungus and tending livestock while the herdsman and her daughter prepare dinner.

The herdsman's son sits near the stove and calculates the day's earnings from their caterpillar fungus collection while the daughter makes dough for the noodles and chops yak meat. The solar panels provide limited electricity for light, so a flashlight is used when more light is needed.

A Tibetan Herdsman's Daily Life focuses on a single day in this woman's life, depicting her onerous daily tasks in real time. When asked about her life choices, she comments:

We don't know how to do business. We can't read and write, so people will cheat us if we open a shop. Also, getting fuel in the township town is hard, and getting dairy products and meat isn't easy. It's better [for us] to herd yaks for more years.

She mentions the lack of forage for yaks because of the pika-damaged grassland resulting in weak yaks that she must hand feed.

She comments that they must feed yaks more now than in earlier times. The family had purchased 2,500 kg of *bya rtug*¹ from the local township town to feed about sixty yaks from March to June.

She hopes they will not continue herding livestock after her daughter graduates from university.

From the herdsman's daily life, we better understand her significant and burdensome contribution to the family. She is busy milking, cooking, herding, collecting caterpillar fungus, feeding animals, and preparing meals from early morning to late night.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

I now compare the films in this review to documentaries of a similar nature on YouTube filmed in Amdo Tibetan areas. I place these films in the following categories: touristic advertisements, random shots, videos of photo collections, and short documentaries.

YouTube places videos in three searchable categories according to duration: under four minutes, four to twenty minutes, and over twenty minutes. Touristic advertisements, random shots, and photo collection videos focus on landscapes, animals, and people for under four minutes. For instance, *Tibetan Nomad Life; Come with Us to Experience the Authentic Nomadic Life in Amdo*² *Tibet*³ gives 2.28 minutes of landscape (clouds and mountains with prayer flags), sheep, yaks, two white men riding horses, and a woman milking in front of her family's black yak-hair tent. Later, she is inside the tent operating a milk separator and tending to a fire burning in a metal stove. The soundtrack is Gangs ljongs yul la ltad mor phebs⁴ 'Come to Visit Tibetan Areas'. This video is representative of several films (*A 2500km Trip into Amdo*,⁵

¹ Cost = three RMB per kg.

² Amdo [A mdo] is the name of a prominent Tibetan region in China, including much of Mtsho sngon.

³ *Amdo Tibet Nomad Life* (2.8 mins, <https://bit.ly/32kt7YR> 31 December 2021).

⁴ Performed by Klu mo rgyal, a well-known Amdo singer. For the song see <https://bit.ly/32Fm8tw> 31 December 2021.

⁵ *A 2500km Trip into Amdo* (1.7 mins, <https://bit.ly/3yFVufX> 31

Nomadic Herding on the Tibetan Plateau,¹ and *Olympus Taiwan - Tibetan Nomads*²). The photo collection videos *Live the Nomad Life in 4K* and *Exploring Nomadic Culture in the Amdo Region of the Tibetan Plateau*³ seem to be advertisements for tourist experiences.

Short documentaries of four to twenty minutes and over twenty minutes feature tourist advertisements and promotional videos focusing on Amdo Tibetan herding life. For example, *Drokpa Nomads - Tibetan Black Tent*,⁴ is 12.48 minutes of a single family's seasonal movement. Activities include folding a black yak-hair tent, packing yaks, driving yaks, unpacking yaks, pitching a black yak-hair tent, making an adobe stove, cutting yak hair, making rope with yak hair, and weaving with yak-hair yarn. This example is representative of several films (*Northern Tibetan Herdsman Life*,⁵ *Tibetan Nomad in Amdo Zorge*,⁶ and *Paul Merton China Tibetan Nomad Life*⁷).

Few films describe Amdo Tibetan herding life in the over twenty-minute slot. One that does is *Nomad Woman's Life in Tibet Drokpa*.⁸ Its forty-eight minutes of herding activities in an Amdo area (the specific location is unidentified) include herding yaks on mountains in chilly weather, collecting yak dung, driving yaks back home in the late afternoon, tethering yaks, collecting frozen yak

December 2021).

¹ *Nomadic Herding on the Tibetan Plateau* (2.20 mins, <https://bit.ly/3mgTMwC> 31 December 2021).

² *Olympus Taiwan – Tibetan Nomads* (2.56 mins, <https://bit.ly/325nvC2> 31 December 2021).

³ *Exploring Nomadic Culture in the Amdo Region of the Tibetan Plateau* (2.47 mins, <https://bit.ly/3pgbtys> 31 December 2021).

⁴ *Drokpa Nomads - Tibetan Black Tent* (12.48 mins, <https://bit.ly/3eaxw3e> 31 December 2021).

⁵ *Northern Tibetan Herdsman Life* (14.53 mins, <https://bit.ly/3sjMThW> 31 December 2021).

⁶ *Tibetan Nomad in Amdo Zorge* (4.49 mins, <https://bit.ly/3mgIGba> 31 December 2021).

⁷ *Paul Merton China Tibetan Nomad Life* (8.05 mins, <https://bit.ly/33zRwdm> 1 December 2021).

⁸ *Nomad Woman's Life in Tibet Drokpa* (48.24 mins, <https://bit.ly/3Fuefpv> 31 December 2021). Drokpa = 'brog pa.

dung, constructing and decorating a yak enclosure, making a dog house with yak dung, making children's toys with yak dung, and fetching water. Two other notable films include *The Woven Tent*¹ and *An Amdo Tibetan Woman's Daily Life (2021)*², documenting authentic pastoral Amdo Tibetan life – not romanticized images of mostly endearing livestock, landscapes, colorful gatherings, and so on.

Gu ru 'phrin las' authentic *Pha sa* and *A Tibetan Herdswoman's Life: 16 Hours in a Day* provide sensitive, respectful insight into contemporary Mgo log generational herders undergoing dramatic social change and environmental challenges in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Gu ru 'phrin las, born and raised locally and familiar with people in the film, has created footage without pretense, without "acting." Viewers encounter footage of real pastoral people and the challenges that they face.

This remarkable work is of great value and will interest all those concerned about the Plateau environment and contemporary Tibetan pastoral life.

APPENDIX: FILMS (all 2 January 2022).

Title	Creator	URL	Mins
<i>A 2500km Trip into Amdo</i>	Le Yu	https://bit.ly/3yFVufX	1.7
<i>A Tibetan Herdswoman's Life: 16 Hours in a Day</i>	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/39JJUff	21
<i>Amdo Tibet Nomad Life</i>	Mystic Tibet Tours	https://bit.ly/32kt7YR	2.8
<i>An Amdo</i>	Klu thar	https://bit.ly/3er2hAU	36.54

¹ *The Woven Tent* (24.20 mins, <https://bit.ly/3puLyTS> 31 December 2021).

² *An Amdo Tibetan Woman's Daily Life (2021)* (36.54 mins, <https://bit.ly/3er2hAU> 31 December 2021).

<i>Tibetan</i>		rgyal		
<i>Woman's Daily</i>				
<i>Life (2021)</i>				
<i>Drokpa</i>		Gordon	https://bit.ly/3eaxw3e	12.48
<i>Nomads</i>	-	Clarke and		
<i>Tibetan Black</i>		Rachael		
<i>Tent</i>		Clarke		
<i>Exploring</i>		Ben	https://bit.ly/3pgbtys	2.47
<i>Nomadic</i>		Cubbage		
<i>Culture in the</i>				
<i>Amdo Region of</i>				
<i>the Tibetan</i>				
<i>Plateau</i>				
Folksong A		Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3zM6Pu6	1.21
		'phrin las		
Folksong B		Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3mb8IMa	1.41
		'phrin las		
Folksong C		Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3CTw8MI	1.16
		'phrin las		
Game A		Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3EYRBFJ	7
		'phrin las		
Game B		Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3mb96u6	9.52
		'phrin las		
Game C		Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3zNQCU	6.47
		'phrin las	U	
<i>Ge</i>	<i>sar</i>	Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3zIgXDT	6.1
<i>Festivities</i>		'phrin las		
<i>Inspiration</i>		Gu ru	https://bit.ly/3oe3MIR	15
		'phrin las		
<i>Nomad</i>		Tibet	https://bit.ly/3Fuefpv	48.2
<i>Woman's Life in</i>		Tuber		4
<i>Tibet Drokpa</i>				
<i>Nomadic</i>		Jackson	https://bit.ly/3mgTMw	2.20
<i>Herding on the</i>		Harvey C		
<i>Tibetan Plateau</i>				

<i>Northern Tibetan Herdsman Life</i>	Jianjiang Wu	https://bit.ly/3sjMThW	14.53
<i>Olympus Taiwan – Tibetan Nomads</i>	Fjavierleo n	https://bit.ly/325nvC2	2.56
Packing a Yak	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3o8LFEE	6.18
<i>Painful Transformation</i>	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3ufqSQo	20.29
<i>Paul Merton China Tibetan Nomad Life</i>	Tibetan Ecology	https://bit.ly/33zRwdm	8.05
<i>Pha sa ཤ་སྔ། [Jeopardy]</i>	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3xybajJ	106
Riddle A	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3kMzDOB	0.39
Riddle B	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3ifvCAB	9.2
Saddling a Horse	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3CRwCTl	2.18
Salting Yaks	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3AQNN6Z	6.26
Story A	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3kNizbn	1.37
Story B	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/2XWCqf5	14.53
Story C	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3zKsOkP	5.17
Story D	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/2XTJ45U	10.10
Story E	Gu ru 'phrin las	https://bit.ly/3osDwL9	4.34

<i>The Woven Tent</i>	Brag mgo ya ma	https://bit.ly/3puLyTS	24.2 0
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<i>Tibetan Nomad in Amdo Zorge</i>	Tibetoday	https://bit.ly/3mgIGba	4.49
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<https://bit.ly/3hm4xM9> 18 July 2021

TIBETAN TERMS

'grog lam ring mo

འབྲོག་ལམ་རིང་མོ།

chos skyong skyabs

ཆོས་སྐྱོང་སྐྱམས།

dpra khyung dpal bzang

དཔྱ་ཁྱུང་དཔལ་བཟང་།

bcig sgril གཅིག་སྒྲིལ།

gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས།

lan gru ལན་གུ།

mgo log མགོ་ལོག།

mgo nag mi rigs bsten sa

phyugs rigs, phyugs rigs

spu rigs bsten sa rtswa

rigs མགོ་ནག་མི་རིགས་བསྐྱེན་ས་ཡུགས་རིགས།

ཡུགས་རིགས་སྤུ་རིགས་བསྐྱེན་ས་རྩ་རིགས།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།

pha sa ཕ་ས།

rnga ba ར་བ།

sgo med སྒོ་མེད།

smin thang སྨིན་ཐང་།